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ABSTRACT

This discussion guide is intended to help school personnel, community members, and board members express and deal with their beliefs about educational philosophy. A series of questions concerning school policies is presented with forced-choice answers. Individual answers are to be brought before a group for comparison, inquiry, and discussion. The purpose of discussing individual responses to these items is to reach an accurate understanding of the agreements and disagreements that actively exist in the total group of concerned persons. (Author/MLF)

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A DISCUSSION GUIDE TO INITIATE STUDY OF EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY AND GOAL SETTING

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FOREWORD

In a busy world all too frequently we do not take sufficient time to think through our beliefs and clarify our values. Instead we set educational goals and objectives in a haphazard manner – without any real framework or full understanding. The *process* of philosophizing has never been highly developed in American education, and yet it is the basis for all curriculum planning. Setting goals and objectives without a coherent philosophy of education is in reality simply giving lip-service to platitudes and not having a basic foundation for the stated beliefs.

This discussion guide attempts to establish a new understanding and quality in developing an educational philosophy. With the current reform movements, the shortage of funds, and a real need for accountability – school districts will have to rethink their goals and objectives and set new priorities. We hope that the process set forth in this document will assist school/communities, districts, staff and board members in their efforts to seek and to provide quality education.

Marian Bergeson, President CSBA
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A Project Coordinated By The

CALIFORNIA SCHOOL BOARDS RESEARCH FOUNDATION

A DISCUSSION GUIDE TO INITIATE STUDY OF EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY AND GOAL SETTING

IMPORTANCE OF A PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy means a coherent and consistent organization of beliefs and values, which is a necessary tool in order to choose, define, and organize the goals and objectives desired for the schools.

The most practical thing a person interested in education can have is an explicit philosophy of education. When thoughtfully developed, one's philosophy of education reveals his basic values, clarifies his choices, and increases his consistency.

When the members of a group, through patient discussion and open-minded listening, succeed in developing a shared philosophy of education, they have a common viewpoint from which to examine most of the problems of curriculum, instruction, school administration, and the societal functions of the school. Indeed, a shared philosophy of education enables them to order their priorities, to judge desirable goals, to select appropriate means, to locate the assumptions in conflicting proposals, and to convert incoherent controversies into sharp issues.

INTRODUCING THE DISCUSSION GUIDE

The discussion guide which follows employs a *process* designed to obtain responses expressive of an individual's educational philosophy. It is a forced- choice process demanding an expression of value judgments, attitudes, and beliefs which may set the stage for developing a course of action at the local district or school level.

This guide is designed both for locating individual views and for promoting serious group discussion. When a person is working alone in deciding on his choices, he may benefit from asking himself two kinds of questions: (a) How strongly am I committed to this choice? (b) How consistent with each other are the reasons for my choices? Do they make a coherent set of beliefs?

The purpose of answering the questions in this guide is not fulfilled, however, until individual decisions are brought before a group for comparison, inquiry, and discussion. It is recommended that the first discussions be held with one's peers and colleagues (i.e., the members of the school board, or a group of parents, or the administrative staff, or a group of teachers, or a group of students). Then when each one has had the experience of explaining his view, or trying to understand another view, and even of changing his own view, one group's members are probably ready to sit down with another group (or its representatives) and repeat this process.

SEEKING A SHARED UNDERSTANDING

The immediate purpose of these joint discussions is to reach an understanding of what the collective point of view is. Where does everyone agree? Would some clarifying rephrasing of a statement bring about a consensus? Where do the sharp differences in judgment appear to lie? Can these be phrased so clearly that both sides agree to the definition of the issue?

Reaching this kind of understanding does not mean taking votes and making the majority view the consensus. Where there actually is consensus, it should be recorded. Where there is genuine difference in judgment or viewpoint, it should also be recorded. Unless the group is willing to acknowledge such differences as part of its self-understanding, the group will be tempted either to substitute a majority vote for a true consensus, thereby concealing its actual division of opinion, or to substitute such a vaguely-worded generality that agreement is bought at the cost of any meaning.

In sum, the purpose of discussing individual responses to these items is to reach an accurate understanding of the agreements and disagreements that actively exist in the total group of concerned persons. This particular mix of value judgments and attitudes will be, in effect, the educational philosophy of the total group. How much of it becomes the educational philosophy of the ultimately responsible group – the school board – depends on how carefully the school board has listened to the discussions and how conscientiously it has tried to incorporate disagreements, as well as agreements into its final statement. In any case, the board's educational philosophy becomes the explicit basis on which the board will then choose, define, and organize the goals and objectives desired for the schools. Some goals and objectives will be easy to justify in the light of the preceding discussion, but others will be more difficult and should first be looked at in the light of the acknowledged disagreements recognized in the community and deliberately represented in the board's thinking.

INSTRUCTIONS

The following represent some value judgments that are basic to developing an educational philosophy and related goals. All of them are presented as forced choices, although you may be tempted to try reconciling some of the conflicts by rephrasing the statements. Try to take one choice or the other, as given, whichever is closer to the way you really feel about a given issue. Postpone any rephrasing of the statement until your views are being discussed alongside other views on the same issue. If rephrasing can achieve significant agreement, it should be done. If it merely obscures a persisting disagreement, it is not worth attempting. Instead, the precise nature of the disagreement should be noted in the available space.

The examples and explanations under most of the alternative statements are intended to clarify the intended meaning. In no case are they intended to exhaust the possible meanings or even to be the principal illustration or typical explanation. As you work through your own responses, keep asking yourself what your reasons are and whether the total of all your reasons are coherently interrelated.

A DISCUSSION GUIDE TO INITIATE STUDY OF EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY AND GOAL SETTING

A. WHAT SOCIAL POLICIES SHOULD THE SCHOOL FOLLOW?

1. When other agencies (home, church, youth groups, etc.) are not doing an adequate job with their responsibilities toward children, should the school take up the slack and try to compensate for the inadequacies of other agencies?

   EXAMPLE: When some homes fail to teach their children a proper hour for bedtime, a proper age to begin dating, etc.

   EXAMPLE: When T.V. programs for children may teach that violence is good if used by "good guys" on the "bad guys".

   EXAMPLE: When children finish high school and enter college without ever having had paid work experience.

   ___ a. No, the school should stick to its main job of intellectual development and insist that other agencies improve their services.

   ___ b. Yes, the school should be responsible for the total development of its students – intellectual, social, personal, etc.

   ___ c. (Rephrasing, if needed)*

2. With respect to differences in social class levels, the school should

   ___ a. Help each child attain the highest level of which he is capable, depending only on his abilities, motivation, and preference.

   EXAMPLE: Helping the poor but talented child to overcome such obstacles as no money, parent indifference, etc.

   ___ b. Adopt whatever means it can to eliminate the tell-tale differences between groups of students that are related to social class differences.

   EXAMPLE: Eliminating differences in speech, manners, health habits, taste in clothes, etc., usually by encouraging close association between disparate groups.

   ___ c. Help students to make an improved, more satisfying adjustment to their own social level rather than demanding that they all adopt middle class standards.

   EXAMPLE: Encouraging different types of excellence in recreational tastes, speech habits, vocational plans, dating practices, etc.

   ___ d. (Rephrasing, if needed)*

*Rephrasing should be attempted whenever needed to either (1) get consensus, or (2) record genuine differences in judgment.

3. Should the school be a critic of the society that supports it?

___ a. As part of its program, the school should teach students how to criticize fairly and objectively the existing social order.

EXAMPLE: Helping students investigate and evaluate the methods of selecting and training the city's police officers.

___ b. The school should develop appreciation of and loyalty to the existing order, urging students to wait until adulthood before criticizing.

EXAMPLE: It is more important to teach children to be law-abiding citizens than to suggest they try reforming the police department.

___ c. (Rephrasing, if needed)*

4. What should be the school's role toward social problems and conflicts?

___ a. It is not the proper business of public schools, at least through the first twelve grades, to be concerned with current social problems. The school's task is to promote mastery of subject matter and the ability to think, and the students, when they become adults, can deal with the problems.

EXAMPLE: The school should promote competence in such basic subjects as history, economics, chemistry, etc. instead of asking immature minds to deal with such problems as inflation, labor strikes, and drug abuse.

___ b. The study of social problems should be included in the curriculum but any student *action* in the light of this study should either be discouraged by the school or be viewed as the acts of private persons taken without the school's support or endorsement.

EXAMPLE: It is all right for students to study the farm workers' dispute with the growers but it is inappropriate for students to take sides in any public action.

___ c. The study of social problems and the actual investigation of possible solutions should be a regular part of secondary education, and student findings should be made publicly available to all thoughtful adults in the community.

EXAMPLE: The incidence of drug abuse in the community and a systematic collection and evaluation of the claims and arguments for alternative solutions.

___ d. Children in secondary school should study systematically the major ways currently being advocated by conservative, liberal, and radical groups for refining, improving, or reconstructing the existing social order.

EXAMPLE: Comparing the different views on inflation control, unemployment, amnesty for draft dodgers, world government, etc.

___ e. (Rephrasing, if needed)*

B. WHAT CONSIDERATION SHOULD BE GIVEN TO STUDENT INTERESTS?

1. What is the proper relation of student interest to the subject to be learned?

___ a. A subject has value only to the extent that it either represents or promotes someone's interest.

EXAMPLE: The possible subject matter from chemistry or ancient history must be related to the learner's interests if it is to become valuable.

___ b. Students should be exposed to worthwhile subject matter and made to pay attention to it; then they might become interested in it after all.

EXAMPLE: Students who at first have to be forced to learn something about ancient history or chemistry, while sometimes finding their interest beginning to grow in these subjects, can always be sure they have learned something worthwhile.

___ c. It is usually undesirable to force students to learn, but on the other hand, students should feel an obligation to pay attention when the subject matter is inherently valuable.

EXAMPLE: When qualified experts have chosen valuable subjects like history or chemistry, the learners should make themselves pay attention to the experts.

___ d. (Rephrasing, if needed)*

2. The student's motive for studying any subject matter is an important aid to learning

___ a. And should be recognized as becoming a part of what the student knows about that subject.

EXAMPLE: Studying electrical circuits to build a radio set produces a different knowledge than does studying these circuits to get a recommending grade in physics.

EXAMPLE: A child's knowledge of arithmetic includes whatever techniques his teacher used to motivate him (e.g., praise, ridicule, threats, encouragement).

___ b. But is should be regarded as independent of what is learned.

EXAMPLE: Physics is physics regardless of why one learns it.

EXAMPLE: A child doesn't have to like history in order to get an understanding of history.

___ c. (Rephrasing, if needed)*

3. When high quality academic achievement is what is being sought, student interest in the work should be considered

___ a. Helpful but not absolutely necessary.

EXAMPLE: The chance for a good grade or the threat of losing some privileges will also motivate the student to high quality achievement.

___ b. Essential and necessary.

EXAMPLE: Extraneous rewards and threats can stimulate adequate achievement but not the highest quality achievement, which is always associated with some genuine interest in the field.

___ c. (Rephrasing, if needed)*

4. Who knows the proper content for the students to study?

___ a. The experts in any subject field know best the true values of that subject, and their selections of the proper content should be what the students study, whether they like it or not.

EXAMPLE: An authoritative textbook (or the district's guidelines or some higher authority) should define what is worth studying in any given subject.

___ b. The teacher and students together should select the most valuable material to study, while using the opinions of experts as resources and suggestions of possibilities to investigate.

EXAMPLE: While textbooks, guidelines, and other expert sources usually offer worthwhile suggestions, the ultimate selection of worthwhile subject matter is a union of what the students would really like to know and what the teacher is competent to help them learn.

___ c. Although he may listen to the advice and suggestions of others, each student should be the final authority and judge of what is best for him to study.

EXAMPLE: Textbooks and district guidelines may have useful suggestions to make, but ultimately it is each student who must make the authentic choice of what subject matter is worth studying in any field, and for how long.

___ d. (Rephrasing, if needed)*

5. A student has learned to be self-disciplined

___ a. When he has learned to persist in overcoming natural obstacles to the achievement of his goals.

EXAMPLE: The persistence and patience needed to master trumpet playing or a tennis backhand or a conversation in a Spanish play.

___ b. When he has acquired the habit of putting forth effort whether he is interested or not.

EXAMPLE: Writing all one's themes neatly in ink because the teacher wants them that way.

___ c. (Rephrasing, if needed)*

C. WHAT KINDS OF LEARNING SHOULD BE EXPECTED IN SCHOOL?

1. The provision of equal opportunity for developing individual differences should mean

___ a. Giving everyone identical instruction in order to discover who can profit from further academic education or further training.

EXAMPLE: Giving everyone the same chance to study math or a foreign language but retaining only those who show a minimal talent.

___ b. Giving everyone the same subject matter but letting them learn at different speeds.

EXAMPLE: Fast, medium, and slow groups for studying history or math, but covering the same content at different rates.

___ c. Making different kinds of subject matter and different kinds of instruction available to students according to their respective interests, talents, and special needs.

EXAMPLE: Equally good material from, say, biology, but one emphasis is on mastering taxonomies, another on doing research, and another on practical applications in the community.

___ d. (Rephrasing, if needed)*

2. The greatest influence, in this school district, on what most students actually learn is

___ a. The quality of the subject matter presented to him by a skilled teacher.

EXAMPLE: Good teaching and good curriculum materials should make most students enthusiastic about a given subject.

___ b. His relationships with other students.

EXAMPLE: His social standing, his degree of acceptance by others.

___ c. (Rephrasing, if needed)*

3. The school should make sure that

___ a. Certain minimal bodies of knowledge and/or skills are learned by all normal students regardless of differences among them.

EXAMPLE: U.S. history for good citizenship, English literature for personal cultivation, conventional spelling.

___ b. All normal students learn what is of value to them, regardless of whether or not other students learn the same thing.

EXAMPLE: In a history class four or five groups might be studying different questions and hence should be evaluated differently at the end.

___ c. (Rephrasing, if needed)*

D. **WHAT SHOULD BE EVALUATED?**

1. The best test of the worth of a school administrator

___ a. Is his capacity for making firm decisions and getting practical results with speed and efficiency.

___ b. Is his practice of using the slower process of encouraging input from everyone affected and of depending on the group's understanding, rather than on his legal power to get things done.

___ c. (Rephrasing, if needed)*

2. The teacher of any given subject should be primarily concerned with

___ a. Achieving only the skills, knowledge, and appreciations belonging to that subject.

EXAMPLE: It's hard enough to get children to learn social studies without being expected to show results in aesthetic tastes, posture, correct spelling, and the like.

___ b. All the changes that are likely to occur in the students through the influences of this classroom.

EXAMPLE: Some will be intellectual, as intended, but others may be spiritual or moral (commitment to an ideal, consideration for others), which is not deliberately intended.

___ c. (Rephrasing, if needed)*

3. In every subject studied, the teacher (or the school) should be primarily concerned with

___ a. The amount of information acquired and the academic beliefs picked up by the students in the class.

EXAMPLE: Amount of information as shown by standardized achievement tests.

EXAMPLE: Such beliefs as the proper uses of scientific method, the greatest American poet, the theory of evolution, the nature of free enterprise and of Communism.

___ b. The scholarly and reasoned ways in which students search for relevant facts and justify whatever conclusions they draw or beliefs they hold.

EXAMPLE: Knowing the facts and arguments supporting your own view as well as those supporting a view you reject.

___ c. (Rephrasing, if needed)*

4. The purposes of education are better achieved when

___ a. The teacher judges each student's performance and assigns a grade to it.

EXAMPLE: The teacher knows best what should have been achieved.

___ b. The students are helped to set their own standards and to evaluate their own performances.

EXAMPLE: Old standards may be inappropriate to different interests and new achievements, but some standards are needed to give direction and closure to the work.

___ c. (Rephrasing, if needed)*

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